

What are Bogus Journals and Why Should We Avoid Them

Willy A. Renandya

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

willy.renandya@nie.edu.sg

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to warn novice researchers/writers of the danger of publishing in journals of questionable quality (often referred to as bogus, scam or predatory journals) and highlight key characteristics of these journals and their method of operation. Understanding the characteristics and how they operate could help us avoid publishing our work in scam journals. These journals claim (falsely) that they employ a blind review process by experts in the field, promise quick turnaround, claim legitimacy by quoting the ISSN and listing a number of databases in which they are indexed (e.g., EBSCO, DOAJ and PROQUEST). The paper outlines 15 reasons why as members of the academic community we should shun journals of dubious quality. The key message of this paper is that before we send our scholarly work to academic journals, we need to invest time doing our due diligence, making sure that our target journal is a legitimate and respectable outlet for our work.

Keywords: bogus journals, scam journals, scholarly work

Introduction

Due to the growing pressure to publish in international journals, it is often tempting for some people to take the shortest possible route to get their work published. One of the easiest and fastest ways is to send manuscripts to questionable journals that are managed by unscrupulous publishers who run their journals like commercial business entities. The main motivation of these publishers is not to select articles based on academic standards, but to get as many articles published so as to maximize their profit. I have seen articles written by ELT scholars and published in journals of questionable quality. I am not suggesting that they did this intentionally, but they could have exercised more precaution when choosing an avenue for their scholarly work.

There are other serious ELT scholars who want to get published in decent academic journals, but, because of lack of experience, may fall victim to deceptively attractive traps set up by bogus publishers or what Jeffrey Beall of the University of Colorado calls ‘**predatory publishers**’. He succinctly describes predatory publishers thus (Beall, 2012a):

“Predatory, open-access publishers are those that unprofessionally exploit the author-pays model of open-access publishing (Gold OA) for their own profit. Typically, these publishers spam professional email lists, broadly soliciting article submissions for the clear purpose of gaining additional income. Operating essentially as vanity presses, these publishers typically have a low article acceptance threshold, with a false-front or non-existent peer review process. Unlike professional publishing operations, whether subscription-based or ethically-sound open access, these predatory publishers add little value to scholarship, pay little attention to digital preservation, and operate using fly-by-night, unsustainable business models.”

He has done a great service to the academic community by compiling a list of predatory publishers from around the world (available in: <http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/>). Beall's list is very extensive and includes numerous publishers that deal with a wide variety of journals in diverse academic fields (e.g., agriculture, medicine, engineering, economics, language studies, literature and language education). These publishers have been quite aggressive in promoting their journals and on several occasions I have received their unsolicited invitations to send or review a manuscript and to serve as member of the editorial or review board. In each case, I didn't bother responding to their invitations.

One of the publishers included in Beall's List of Predatory Publishers is the Canadian Center of Science and Education (CCSE). CCSE publishes a language related journal called *English Language Teaching* (<http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/index>). I became personally interested because the name of the journal reminded me of a well-established mainstream journal, the *English Language Teaching Journal*, now known as the *ELT Journal*, published by Oxford University Press. I got curious since I had not heard about this CCSE journal before and decided to do due diligence on it.

I browsed through its website but found that everything seemed fine. The website provided information typically found in mainstream journals such as the aim and scope of the journal, the editor and editorial board members, the review policy, the instructions for authors, and other pertinent information. Closer inspection however revealed that unlike the more established mainstream journals, this journal publishes a lot more articles (12 issues per year and each issue contains some 15-17 articles, for a total of approximately 170 articles). I also learned that it is an online, open access journal that charges author fees. Recently, the fees have gone up from US\$300 to USD\$400!!

The most bewildering discovery was that besides ELT-related articles, the journal also published papers that are unrelated, or only remotely related, to English language teaching. For example, there is one highly theoretical paper published in 2010 that discusses the relationship between mental space theory and misunderstanding; and another one published in 2012 which discusses the relationship between teacher qualifications on students' performance in physics! One wonders how a paper that is not related to English language teaching got included in this journal. It is probably because of evidence like this, Beall has put CCSE in his list of questionable publishers. However, I urge you, the readers, to do your own research or due diligence on this publisher, and to not solely rely on Beall's assessment.

Spotting Bogus Journals

But how do we distinguish a decent journal publisher from a bogus one? There are a number of tell-tale signs that should alert us of the dubious quality of a journal. I list some of them below.

Publication Fees

This is perhaps the most obvious tell-tale sign. None of the mainstream international journals in TESOL and Applied Linguistics that I know of charges publication fees. Bogus journals thrive on fees. They have to charge publication fees in order to survive and to profit from their business. Mainstream journals on the other hand are either funded by academic institutions or charge subscription fees to their subscribers. They don't normally charge fees.

The fees that bogus publishers charge range from US\$300-550, which by any standard is quite exorbitant. Some charge up to US\$900 or more per published manuscript. Despite what the publisher says about the possibility of a fee waiver, I doubt that you will be able to get published without paying the quoted fees.

Note however that not all journals that charge fees are bogus. There are a number of legitimate journals (mostly high-profile medical or science journals) that charge publication fees. There are also some legitimate journals published by professional organizations (e.g., TEFLIN – The Association of Teaching English as a Foreign Language and KATE – Korea Association of Teachers of English) that charge fees in order to defray the cost of publication. These trustworthy journals managed by professional editors and supported by respectable reviewers. My view however is that since there are hundreds of legitimate journals in our field that do not charge fees, it makes little sense to pay author fees in order to get published.

High Publication Frequency

Most mainstream journals in TESOL and applied linguistics publish two to four issues per year. Some print six issues per year (e.g., *The Language Teacher* published by JALT in Japan) and some only one issue per year (e.g., *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press). Bogus journals tend to have a lot more issues. The reason is simple: the more frequent, the more money the publisher gets. Some of them publish as frequently as one issue per month or 12 issues per year. The CCSE journal referred to above publishes 15 – 20 articles per issue! Just do your maths to figure out the publisher's the annual revenue from this journal alone (it has a fleet of journals under its business wing).

Extremely High Acceptance Rate

On average, mainstream journals have an acceptance rate of about 25-30%. Some may have a higher acceptance rate (50%), especially newer journals. The more established journals in our field on the other hand have much lower acceptance rate, some of which as low as 5% (e.g., TESOL Quarterly). If you are a junior faculty and new in the publication business, you might want to look for academic journals that have lower rejection rates. I encourage you to look at my

paper “Choosing the right international journals in TESOL and Applied Linguistics” (2014) for a list of journals with higher acceptance rates.

Bogus journals typically have a very high acceptance rate, perhaps as high as 100%. So when you send a manuscript and it comes back to you with no required corrections, i.e., your manuscript is accepted as is, the bell in your head should go off and tell you that this journal is probably of questionable quality. Before you make any further action, you should then check it against Beall’s list of questionable standalone journals (<http://scholarlyoa.com/individual-journals/>). It is extremely rare (practically impossible) for a manuscript to be accepted without revision!

Quick Turnaround Time

The normal wait time when you submit a manuscript to mainstream journals ranges from two to six months. The *ELT Journal* (Oxford University Press) for example has a quick turnaround time, which normally takes about two months or so. But this is rather rare as many of the other mainstream journals have a longer wait time, usually about four to six months. I recently co-wrote a manuscript with my former student and sent it to the *Journal of Asia TEFL* (published by Asia TEFL) and was informed that it would take the reviewers up to six months to get their review reports done.

Bogus journals on the other hand have a quick turnaround time. The review and publication process can be as short as four to six weeks. With mainstream journals, the time it takes to have your paper published can take up to 12 months or longer. Thus, a quick wait time is a clear tell tale sign that you may be dealing with a bogus journal. Bogus publishers highlight the quick turnaround time and promise authors speedy review and publication of their manuscripts (Beall, 2012b). Here’s an example from IJEL (*International Journal of English Literature*). The

publisher of this journal is Academic Journals, listed as one of the possibly questionable publishers by Beall.

Review Process

All manuscripts are reviewed by an editor and members of the Editorial Board or qualified outside reviewers. Decisions will be made as **rapidly** as possible, and the journal strives to return reviewers' comments to authors within **3 weeks**. The editorial board will re-review manuscripts that are accepted pending revision. It is the goal of the IJEL to publish manuscripts within **8 weeks** after submission.

Source: <http://www.academicjournals.org/ijel/Instruction.htm>

Low or Extremely Uneven Quality of Published Articles

A good practice before you send your paper to a journal is to familiarize yourself with the type of articles published in that journal. This way you know about the people who write for this journal, the kind of topics they write about, the style of writing expected by the editor, the target audience, the people who sit on the editorial and review board, etc. If you browse a bogus journal, you will notice that the quality of the published articles is very uneven and tends to be on the low end of the continuum. The topics are not current, the literature review is dated and contains inaccurate citations, the argument is neither cogent nor coherent, and the language is often problematic. The language aspect is perhaps the most telling feature of articles published in bogus journals. I have seen published articles that are simply full of grammatical and typographical errors.

Here's an example of an abstract from *English Language Teaching* by Miao (2010) that contains obvious language errors. In addition, the abstract is not coherently written and does not really provide a clear synopsis of what the article is about. This tells us that the paper was

probably not properly reviewed and the editor did not proof-read the language and the contents of the paper.

**The Practice of English Teaching
in the Meteorological Correspondence Education**

Abstract

The correspondence education is the important part of the national education, and its education objects give priority to working staffs. The objects of the meteorological correspondence education are working staffs in the meteorological departments, and most of these students have engaged in the operation work for a long time, keeping at a distance with theoretical learning, and because the attended study time of correspondence education is deficient, and most of them are difficult to study. English is a basic course in the meteorological correspondence education, and the students have different English levels, so the English teaching becomes difficult. To enhance the teaching level of the meteorological correspondence education, the existing problems in the current meteorological correspondence English teaching are analyzed, and the methods of adults' English learning are discussed in this article.

Source: <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/37035>

It is worth mentioning that the language aspect should not be taken as the sole criterion for determining the quality of a journal. In places where English is not the main or official language of the country, one can expect more variations in the language used in the journals as both the editors and authors are often L2 speakers of English. While they are competent users of the language, their writing may contain language features that may not always conform to the native speaker norms.

Obscure Editorial/Review Board Members

The members of the editorial/review board of bogus journals are normally obscure scholars whom you have never heard before. They may hold doctorate degrees and are affiliated with universities or research institutions, but they may not have the relevant expertise to serve as managing editors or reviewers. When the list does include some well-known people, it is possible, as intimated by Beall (2012b), that they are just used as a ‘false front’ or they may not have been aware that their names are listed in the journal. A colleague (an established ELT researcher) from Taiwan was shocked when I told her that her name was listed as a member of the editorial board of a scam journal. She said that she was not aware that her name was listed and that the journal had never asked her for permission! Fortunately, she managed to get the editor to remove her name from the journal.

Thus with bogus journals, what happens is that your paper may be accepted and published without any due review process. The person who decides on the fate of your paper is none other than the editor, or worse, an editorial staff member. I won’t be surprised that the decision is perhaps based solely on whether or not you have paid the publication fees!

How do They Lure Unsuspecting Novice Writers?

The number of bogus publishers has been increasing a great deal in the past 10 years and they have become more aggressive too in promoting their business. Many of these publishers send out unsolicited emails inviting people to submit manuscripts. For unsuspecting junior faculty, the email message from the editor may sound very appealing. The following are typically included in the email message (Brown, 2013):

1. The email quotes one or two titles of your conference or journal papers, giving you the impression that they have read your work and are impressed by it;

2. It flatters you by addressing you with academic titles such as ‘Dr’ or ‘Prof’ in the salutation and refer to you as an expert in the field;
3. It encourages you to submit a manuscript;
4. It takes great pains to claim legitimacy of their journal by
 - Listing the journal’s ISSN (International Standard Serial Number);
 - Referring to it as an internationally recognized journal;
 - Claiming that the journal employs a double-blind review process;
 - Claiming that the journal is indexed by a number of data bases (e.g., DOAJ, EBSCO, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus and Ulrich’s);
5. It promises a speedy review process by experts in the field;
6. It subtly promises acceptance of your submission;
7. It ends by inviting you to join their editorial or review board.

Novice writers may feel flattered upon receiving an email invitation like this. A couple of junior colleagues have recounted how they fell victim to the scam. They took the email invitation seriously thinking the journal was legitimate. They sent their manuscripts and within two weeks, the editor got back to them informing them that their papers had been reviewed and were accepted with no revision required. The next step, the editor said, was for them to pay a publication fee (the amount ranged from \$300-\$500) before their papers got printed in the journal. Thinking that it was quite normal for journals to charge fees, they gladly sent their cheque to the journal, only to realize afterwards that their papers had been accepted for publication by a scam journal.

15 Reasons Why We Should Shun Bogus Publishers

Open-access publishing can be a blessing and a curse. It can be a blessing because the number of scholarly publishing outlets have increased dramatically in the past decade, enabling a lot more academics to have their views, ideas, research findings disseminated in scholarly forums and shared with academics from around the world. But it can also be a curse because the number of low quality publication has also shot up as a result of the open-access publication boom. The problem is worsened by the growing number of bogus publishers who deliberately entice people (using all sorts of deceitful tactics), to have their manuscripts published, often without a proper review process as long as they pay publication fees.

As a responsible member of the academic community, we are duty bound to uphold academic integrity and inform people of the irreparable damage that bogus publishers bring to our profession. I list below 15 reasons why as a profession we should shun and condemn bogus publishers.

1. It's unethical to publish in journals run by unethical, unscrupulous people who use illegitimate means to deceive unsuspecting junior faculty and graduate students. Academics are bound by a set of ethical standards. Although these ethical standards are not always written, it is understood that we have to uphold them all the time. Publishing in illegitimate journals is an ethical decision.
2. If you publish with bogus journals, you are in essence abetting their crime, thus allowing more scholars to become victims of their scam. You should instead warn your colleagues of the existence of these journals and tell them to stay away from them. You can and should actively warn people of the danger that these journals pose to the academic community. If you don't do it, who will?

3. Publishing in bogus journals gives you a false sense of achievement. While it may give you immediate rewards (extra allowance, career promotion, etc), in actual fact, you are doing a big disservice to yourself, your institution and the whole academic community. Yes, you get to see your paper in print but chances are very low that people read your published paper, much less cite it.
4. It is a lose-win game. You lose, they win. You lose your integrity, self esteem and identity as a scholar; they win big by using your money to expand their publishing business.
5. You set a bad example for your more junior colleagues and for your students who look up to you as a respectable member of the academic community.
6. Sending your manuscript to these journals is a serious underestimate of your scholarly ability. If you do your homework, you will be able to find just the right journal for your scholarly work (see Renandya, 2014 for a list of journals with fairly decent acceptance rates).
7. There are many people who are more junior than you who have published in respectable international journals. If they can do it, there is no reason why you can't! All you need to have is a willingness and commitment to invest a bit of time and do a bit of research.
8. It takes a life time to build a respectable career, but it takes one single mistake to destroy it. Publishing in a journal of questionable quality is a big mistake. Don't make that mistake!
9. People do make mistakes. If you have published in bogus journals before, it is not the end of the world. But instead of hiding your mistake, you should come clean and admit it (at least to yourselves!). What is done cannot be undone. What you can do is spread the word and let your colleagues know of the danger of publishing in bogus journals.
10. If writing for international publication is not your cup of tea, so be it. You can still be a great teacher without ever having published a single academic article in an international journal.

You can instead write course books or other teacher resource materials for use in your own institution or for the general public. It can be equally rewarding, professionally speaking.

11. Writing for local or national journals can be a professionally rewarding experience too. You can also get your conference papers published in a proceeding or monograph. You don't always have to publish international journals.
12. It's not worth paying \$500 to get your paper published in a bogus international journal. Use the money instead for other more useful purposes. You can donate it to a charitable organization or set up a scholarship fund for your needy students. Or use it for your own professional development needs by buying reference materials produced by respectable publishers.
13. Mainstream journals in TESOL and Applied Linguistics do not normally charge authors publications fees so there's no compelling reason to publish in bogus journals that charge fees. All of these journals would welcome your submissions. Here are some legitimate mainstream journals that have been around for years:
 - ELT Journal (<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/>)
 - English Australia Journal
(http://www.englishaustralia.com.au/english_australia_journal.html)
 - English Teaching Forum (<http://exchanges.state.gov/englishteaching/forum-journal.html>)
 - Modern English Teacher (<http://www.modernenglishteacher.com/homepage/>)
 - RELC Journal (<http://rel.sagepub.com/>)
 - System (<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/system/>)
 - TESOL in Context (<http://www.tesol.org.au/Publications/TESOL-in-Context>)

- TESOL Journal (<http://www.tesol.org/read-and-publish/journals/tesol-journal>)

For a longer list of legitimate mainstream journals in TESOL and Applied Linguistics, please visit: <http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/books/how-to-get-published-in-applied-linguistics-serials.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

14. Publishing in bogus journals is a form of cheating. You don't want to be accused of applying double standards, setting one standard for your students (i.e., cheating is bad) and another standard for you (i.e., cheating is okay as long as you don't get caught).
15. As we live in a connected world, it is inconceivable to claim ignorance and give a feeble excuse such as 'Oh I thought the journal looks professional so I sent my manuscript to them.' All you need to do is ask your more experienced colleagues in your institution or your virtual friends. For the latter, you can join a FB online discussion group called 'Teacher Voices' (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices/>). It's a professional development forum for language teachers (set up and managed by responsible language scholars from Indonesia), of which I am a dedicated member. Members of this forum are pretty well-informed and will be more than happy to help you distinguish a respectable publisher from a bogus one. The bottom line here is this: Do a due diligence before sending your manuscript to a journal.

ELT Journal (<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/>)

English Australia Journal

(http://www.englishaustralia.com.au/english_australia_journal.html)

English Teaching Forum (<http://exchanges.state.gov/englishteaching/forum-journal.html>)

Modern English Teacher (<http://www.modernenglishteacher.com/homepage/>)

RELC Journal (<http://rel.sagepub.com/>)

System (<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/system/>)

TESOL in Context (<http://www.tesol.org.au/Publications/TESOL-in-Context>)

TESOL Journal (<http://www.tesol.org/read-and-publish/journals/tesol-journal>)

For a longer list of legitimate mainstream journals in TESOL and Applied Linguistics, please visit:

<http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/books/how-to-get-published-in-applied-linguistics-series.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

Publishing in bogus journals is a form of cheating. You don't want to be accused of applying double standards, setting one standard for your students (i.e., cheating is bad) and another standard for you (i.e., cheating is okay as long as you don't get caught).

As we live in a connected world, it is inconceivable to claim ignorance and give a feeble excuse such as 'Oh I thought the journal looks professional so I sent my manuscript to them.' All you need to do is ask your more experienced colleagues in your institution or your virtual friends. For the latter, you can join a FB online discussion group called 'Teacher Voices' (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices/>). It's a professional development forum for language teachers (set up and managed by responsible language scholars from Indonesia), of which I am a dedicated member. Members of this forum are pretty well-informed and will be more than happy to help you distinguish a respectable publisher from a bogus one. The bottom line here is this: Do a due diligence before sending your manuscript to a journal.

Conclusion

This article has been written to provide novice researchers and writers with practical knowledge on how they can identify journals of dubious quality, published by irresponsible publishers and how they need to exercise extra precaution when choosing journals for their scholarly works. If we are not careful and choose the wrong journal, our reputation and career

may be adversely affected. Indeed, I have heard of stories of how faculty members working in research-intensive universities were denied tenure and/promotion because they had published in bogus journals.

I'd like to end my article by urging the readers to do due diligence before they submit their paper to a journal. Doing due diligence include checking up on the background of the editor and editorial/review board members (e.g., Are they well-known scholars in our field? What are their areas of specialization? Have you seen/read their scholarly works in mainstream journals?), browsing some of the published articles in the journal (e.g., Are they well-written? Are the topics recent? Are the references up-to-date? Have the authors of these articles published in other reputable journals?) and consulting your more senior and knowledgeable colleagues on the legitimacy of these journals. By researching the journal in this way, you would have more confidence that your paper would not end up appearing in a scam journal.

References

- Beall, J. (2012a). Beall's list of predatory open-access publishers. Retrieved 31 August 2012 from <http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/>
- Beall, J. (2012b). Criteria for determining predatory open-access publishers. Retrieved 1 September 2012 from <http://scholarlyoa.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/criteria-2012.pdf>
- Brown, H. (2013). Unscrupulous journal solicitations: What they are, what they do, and how you can protect yourself. *The Language Teacher*, 37(3), May 2013. Retrieved 15 August 2014 from <http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/outreach/articles/3062-unscrupulous-journal-solicitations-what-they-are-what-they-do>
- Renandya, W.A. (2014). Choosing the right international journal in TESOL and Applied Linguistics. *English Language Teaching World Online: Voices from the Classroom (ELTWO)*, 6, 1-17 (http://blog.nus.edu.sg/eltwo/files/2014/06/Choosing-the-Right-International-Journal-in-TESOL-and-Applied-Linguistics_editforpdf-10fhdm.pdf).

Acknowledgement

I'm grateful to Flora Debora Floris of Petra Christian University for her insightful comments on the earlier draft of this article and for supplying me with additional materials on predatory publishers and journals.

August 2014